great material to think about “official nationalism” and the state invention of tradition, and his work on Indonesia (and the Philippines) allowed him to appreciate the power of “popular nationalism,” and its subsequent death in the hands of an authoritarian state. One can already see the seeds of Imagined Communities in the series of early essays on Indonesia and Thailand.

The last part of Exploration and Irony consists of three essays and one set of “two Unsendable letters” which basically say that a true nationalist should be able to feel shame for his or her country’s misconduct. The last three essays, inspired perhaps by his earlier writing on “political communication” of New Order Indonesia, offer his most recent thoughts, with discursive materials from the media and visual environment. His meditation on films teases out a range of subjects (from gender and sexuality to class and ethnicity) that are hard to imagine by the fossilized Bangkok middle class. This cultural production, while (not always) beyond the reach of the state, offers hope for a counternarrative and different consciousness. The title of the last chapter, “Mundane History,” indicates just how much mundane materials from everyday life, which are often looked down on by the big data of the political science discipline and the regime of archival truth in history, can constitute a politically engaging scholarship. This is also a country study with a comparative dimension, as one can learn more about Indonesia through a reading of Thailand.

The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada

Abidin Kusno

IDENTITY AND PLEASURE: The Politics of Indonesian Screen Culture.


In this fascinating study, Ariel Heryanto continues the line of investigation developed in one of his previous books, the edited collection, Popular Culture in Indonesia: Fluid Identities in Post-Authoritarian Politics (2008). That is, Heryanto sets out to examine the complex ways in which popular culture, especially “screen culture” (films, television, Internet), is intertwined with the production of identity and the politics connected to identity. In this case, Heryanto is most centrally concerned with Indonesian urban middle-class youth in a context of progressive “Islamization” and against a historical background of a rich and extremely varied diversity of peoples, cultures, and continuing creative ideas.

Identity and Pleasure is divided into roughly three broad sections. Following its introductory opening chapter, Heryanto devotes chapters 2 and 3 to an examination of what he, modifying Asef Bayat’s concept, terms Indonesian “post-Islamism”—both a condition and project in which some
Indonesian Muslims seeking to correct the exclusions and repressions of the secularist New Order regime of President Suharto, attempt to combine Islam with individual rights, freedom, democracy, and modernity. He notes the growth of this strain of Islamic piety together with an industry devoted to Islamic women’s fashion, and dedicates much of chapter 3 to demonstrating the diversity of Islamic positions on faith and identity as represented in several Islamic-themed films, such as Hanung Bramantyo’s 2008 film version of Habiburrahman El-Shirazy’s *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* (Verses of Love), and the popular reactions to them. Heryanto sees the hero of *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*—devout, hard-working, well-educated in matters pertaining to Islam, conversant with Western culture, and economically comfortable—as a new icon of urban middle-class “post-Islamism.” Most striking, and complementing work by Daromir Rudnyckyj and others, Heryanto sees this hero as combining pious religious faith and practice with the ability to live a comfortable modern consumerist lifestyle. Heryanto also notes the irony of the creeping authority of political Islamism within the Indonesian political elite at the same time that the relatively more relaxed form of “post-Islamism” has taken root among young urban professionals.

A second section comes to grips with the “losers” in the pre-New Order struggle to define Indonesia’s modern national identity: those accused of being communists or communist sympathizers, many thousands of whom were massacred or imprisoned after the events of September 30, 1965. Chapters 4 and 5 are thus given over to elucidating the continuing tensions arising from this history, and describing the various attempts to give filmic voice to the victims and, in some remarkable cases, the perpetrators of some of the mass slaughters. Certainly, Joshua Oppenheimer’s *The Act of Killing* (2012) is one of the key films discussed, but it is only one of several, some of which were made possible by the increased availability and low costs of using new digital technologies. Heryanto points out continued resistance to reopening these old wounds and sees this resistance as a key historical evasion that has made it difficult for Indonesians to understand in a more nuanced and meaningful way current social and political conflicts.

In its final section, *Identity and Pleasure* explores two topics. The first is the immense popularity of Korean and Northeast Asian popular culture (music, television serials, etc.) in Indonesia, including the attraction of Korean pop (K-Pop) music idols for many young women, not a few of whom wear the Islamic *jilbab* (body and hair-covering garments). He views this phenomenon as empowerment for (mainly) middle-class segments of Indonesia’s female population insofar as they are able to consume and express their pleasure in dance and displays of attraction to handsome Northeast Asian male film and music idols, activities which demonstrate a desire similar to that of fans of *Ayat-Ayat Cinta*—to be Islamic and modern at one and the same time. Enjoyment of Taiwanese and Korean television serials, Heryanto argues, also demonstrates an appreciation for hard work as a moral good in itself, rather
than as a strategy to gain material reward as in most Hollywood films. All of this also displays a somewhat mitigated feeling towards “Chinese-looking” people that would have been hard to imagine in Indonesia (where anti-Chinese feeling has run deeply at times) less than two decades ago.

The second topic, to which the book’s last chapter is devoted, is an examination of lower-class participation in Indonesian electoral politics and that group’s current fragmentation and disempowerment as elections have turned towards media-savvy entertainment-oriented styles. Ironically, the lower-class participation in elections may well have been more subversive and powerful, Heryanto concludes, when they were allowed to engage in New Order “Festival of Democracy” parades which often turned quite disorderly in an almost carnivalesque fashion.

Heryanto’s arguments are theoretically careful, nuanced, and innovative, always seeking more detailed understandings and explanations for the popularity (or lack of it) of his subjects; Islamic lifestyles and films, films about the tragic events of 1965–66, K-pop, and increasingly entertainment-oriented political campaigns. Throughout, Heryanto continues to explore the production of diverse and often conflicting identities within the Indonesian polity and its varied cultures. A key theme to which he returns several times is that cultural production of identities in what is now Indonesia has long been hybrid and international—from at least the late colonial period when cross-racial groups within Indonesia produced theatre, film, fiction and other products that constituted the forerunners of national culture. Furthermore, Heryanto argues, much of this history and creativity has been consciously erased from memory by Indonesian elites seeking to redefine and control Indonesian identity as a more exclusive preserve of non-Chinese Indonesians with minimal influence from the West.

Taken altogether, and considering the range and depth of the discussions it contains, this is a very rich and stimulating work of cultural anthropology. Identity and Pleasure deserves serious attention from both those interested in contemporary Indonesian culture and politics, and those engaging with theoretical issues of identity production.

University of Victoria, Victoria, Canada

Michael Bodden


On the front cover of In Search of Middle Indonesia is a remarkable photograph. A man is seated upon a motorbike the colour of a green tree frog, which is parked by the side of the road. One leg is folded, his heel is in his crotch.